

Why did Moses stammer? and, was Moses left-handed?

Henry A Garfinkel MRCP (UK)

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SUMMARY

Moses, the great lawgiver, '... the chief of the prophets' according to Maimonides¹, probably had a speech defect. 'I am not a man of words... for I am of slow speech, and of a slow tongue'², Moses states, and later he pleads '... I am of uncircumsized lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me'³. Most authorities consider these quotations to mean that he stammered.

INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this study are: (1) to suggest a plausible medical explanation for Moses' stammer; (2) to present evidence for the laterality of Moses; and (3) to suggest evidence linking the above.

Although no cause is apparent in many people who stammer, a number of associations are recognized.

Hereditary factors, brain damage and anxiety may be related to a stutter⁴. Walter Alvarez⁵ noted an association between stammering, psychosis and epilepsy. Janet⁶ believed that hysteria and stammering may co-exist. Michael Barsley⁷ records associations between left-handedness and stammering.

There is considerable evidence that stammers are caused by an emotional stress combined with mental conflicts occurring at the same time. The late Dave Elman, an extremely respected and experienced hypnotherapist believed this and he wrote that 'every stutter has a basic investigable cause'⁸. It is hoped to demonstrate that this latter theory can explain the stammer of Moses.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

This is based on the last few sections of the book of Genesis and the early part of the book of Exodus. Moses was born into a nation of refugees. His ancestors had come to Egypt to escape a famine and, although they were at first made welcome, by the time that Moses was born the Israelites were enduring a bitter and harsh slavery, so vicious that all newborn Jewish males were drowned by the Egyptians soon after their birth.

Providentially, the baby Moses was adopted by Pharaoh's daughter and brought up as a prince of Egypt in the royal palaces.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION

Much of this evidence is derived from the Midrashim, a collection of learned books that search for meanings in the Bible which are not initially apparent. The word Midrash is derived from another word 'darash' which means 'to enquire' or 'to investigate'.

Rabbinic legend records⁹ that one day the young Moses was playing with Pharaoh and innocently took hold of his crown, placing it on his own head. One can imagine the consternation and horror that swept the palace. Was this an omen that the young Hebrew would one day destroy Pharaoh and his evil dynasty and become the most powerful man in the country? The tension must have been so agonizing, that the onlookers became paralysed and dumb with fear. Probably all background noise ceased and the atmosphere must have been intense.

Eventually a test was devised. Some authorities believe that Jethro¹⁰, the future father-in-law of Moses, proposed the trial and others that the angel Gabriel¹¹, disguised as a human-being, was responsible. It was proposed that two bowls were to be brought, one filled with chunks of shining gold, or, according to another author, a piece of bright onyx, or according to yet another authority, a date¹², and the other bowl with pieces of burning coal. These basins were placed in front of Moses. Were he to take a piece of the former, it was declared, this would indicate that he would one day usurp the throne of Egypt and he would be killed. On the other hand, were he to take one of the red hot embers, the verdict would be: innocent.

One can imagine, that as the trial started, rhythmic melodies were played and the onlookers, especially Pharaoh, were filled with apprehension and foreboding. Moses, according to some, a mere 3 year old at the time, must surely have sensed that a powerful and compelling drama was taking place. The high tension, the throbbing music and his own feelings of fear all predisposed to a likely trance-state in the youngster.

Tradition teaches that Moses moved his hand towards the bowl containing the gold. When it seemed he was just about to take some of the precious metal, the suspense must have been almost palpable. Midrashic legend explains that the angel Gabriel¹¹ forced Moses' hand away from its intended path to the container with the fiery coal. He clutched a lump of the material and probably dropped it instantly. No doubt, he burnt his fingers and brought his painful hand to his mouth to suck and cool the digits. Some glowing splinters probably stuck to his hand so that his lips and mouth also became burnt.

At that moment, the palace atmosphere must have changed completely. Pharaoh probably smiled and then laughed with relief. The royal attendants must have followed his example and started to cheer unrestrainedly.

Moses, already in an almost certain trance-state must have been in mental turmoil. The recent events including his inability to move his hand in the direction that he wanted and then the burns of his fingers, lips and tongue, are likely to have resulted in a terrified youngster, hypnotized, immobile and unable to speak. It is easy to understand how, following such an experience, Moses could have been left with a permanent speech defect.

Interestingly, Louis Ginzberg in his authoritative book *The Legends of the Jews*¹¹ writes

... The coal burnt the child's hand, and he lifted it up and touched it to his mouth, and burnt part of his lips and part of his tongue and for all of his life he became slow of speech and of a slow tongue.

It may be relevant to this discussion to note that one of the prayers Jews are expected to say before retiring to bed at night also contains the name of Gabriel '... may Michael be at my right hand, Gabriel, at my left...' ¹³. According to Israel Abrahams¹⁴ this passage appeared in a prayer book in the late fourteenth century but there are similar passages in much earlier literature.

This may indicate that the angel Gabriel is somehow protective of the left side of the body. If this supposition is correct then it may have been Gabriel, the guardian of our left, who saved Moses by forcibly moving his left arm and hand. Generally, the dominant upper limb is the one that is likely to reach out for an article and according to this reasoning Moses may, therefore, well have been left-handed.

Note

Levin wrote about 'The speech defect of Moses' (October 1992 *JRSM*, p632). His interesting paper differs in the

conclusions that I have presented. He suspected a physical birth defect in the mouth of Moses.

CONCLUSION

Moses probably suffered from a stammer. There are known factors which can produce such a speech defect and a plausible explanation for his stutter is presented. It is reasoned that he was in a deep hypnotic trance brought about by intense mental and physical turmoil when he was aged 3. Associated injury to his mouth and tongue probably resulted in permanent damage to his speech.

Evidence is also presented suggesting that Moses may have been left-handed.

His prophetic ability as an adult may well have been aided by his skill in achieving a deep trance state which he first acquired at the time of his ordeal in Pharaoh's palace.

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